

Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy in the Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Academic Stress among Higher Secondary Students

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Abstract

Academic stress has become a growing psychological concern among higher secondary students due to heightened academic pressure, competitive examination systems, and performance-oriented evaluation practices. Emotional intelligence has been widely recognised as an important psychological resource in managing academic stress; however, the underlying mechanism through which it influences stress remains insufficiently explored. The present study investigates the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students. A quantitative research approach using a correlational survey design was adopted. Data were collected from 300 Class XI students enrolled in U.P. Board schools in Prayagraj city. After screening the responses for completeness and consistency, 289 valid questionnaires were retained for final analysis. Standardised psychological instruments were used to measure emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and academic stress. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and regression-based mediation analysis. The results revealed a significant negative relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress, indicating that emotionally intelligent students experience lower levels of academic stress. Emotional intelligence was also found to be positively associated with self-efficacy, while self-efficacy showed a strong negative association with academic stress. Mediation analysis confirmed that self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress, suggesting that emotional intelligence reduces academic stress both directly and indirectly by strengthening students' beliefs in their academic capabilities. The findings emphasise the critical role of self-efficacy as a psychological mechanism linking emotional intelligence and academic stress.

Keywords: *Academic Stress, Emotional Intelligence, Self-Efficacy, Mediation Analysis, Higher Secondary Students*

1. Introduction

Academic stress has emerged as a critical psychological concern among higher secondary students in recent years, particularly due to escalating academic demands, competitive examination systems, continuous assessment practices, and heightened expectations from parents and society. Contemporary educational environments increasingly emphasise performance, ranking, and outcomes, which has intensified pressure on adolescents during a crucial stage of academic and psychosocial development (Sharma & Kaur, 2022; Singh & Kumar, 2023). Higher secondary education represents a decisive phase, as academic performance at this level significantly influences students' access to higher education and future career opportunities. Consequently, students often experience stress levels that exceed their perceived coping capacities, leading to emotional and psychological strain.

Academic stress refers to the psychological discomfort experienced when academic demands are perceived as overwhelming or unmanageable. It includes stress related to examinations, academic workload, time constraints, fear of failure, and performance expectations. Recent empirical studies have demonstrated that prolonged academic stress adversely affects students' emotional well-being, motivation, concentration, and academic engagement (Kumar & Bhargava, 2022; Putwain & Daly, 2023). At the adolescent stage, where emotional regulation and identity formation are still developing, sustained academic stress can contribute to anxiety, burnout, and reduced academic self-concept, thereby affecting both immediate academic outcomes and long-term psychological health (Upadhyay & Singh, 2024).

In response to these concerns, educational psychology has increasingly focused on identifying internal psychological resources that enable students to cope effectively with academic stress. Among these, emotional intelligence has gained significant attention as a crucial protective factor. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilise emotions in oneself and others. Students with higher emotional intelligence are better equipped to manage negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and fear of failure, which are

commonly associated with academic challenges. Recent studies have consistently reported a negative association between emotional intelligence and academic stress, suggesting that emotional competence plays a vital role in reducing stress and enhancing academic adaptation (Gupta & Khan, 2022; Singh & Singh, 2025).

Another important psychological construct closely associated with academic stress is self-efficacy. Grounded in social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to organise and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes. In academic settings, self-efficacy influences students' motivation, persistence, effort, and coping behaviour. Recent research indicates that students with high academic self-efficacy tend to perceive academic demands as challenges rather than threats, which significantly lowers stress perceptions and enhances resilience (Mahato & Sen, 2022; Rahman et al., 2024). Conversely, low self-efficacy has been linked to heightened academic stress, test anxiety, and avoidance-oriented coping strategies (Kaur & Verma, 2023).

Although emotional intelligence and self-efficacy have independently been recognised as significant predictors of academic stress, recent studies have emphasised the need to explore the mechanisms through which these variables interact. Emerging evidence suggests that emotional intelligence may indirectly influence academic stress by strengthening students' self-efficacy beliefs through improved emotional regulation, confidence, and adaptive coping skills (Zysberg & Dolev, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2025). In this context, self-efficacy may function as a mediating variable that explains how emotional intelligence translates into lower academic stress levels.

Despite growing international literature, there remains a notable research gap in the Indian context, particularly at the higher secondary level. Most recent studies have focused on university students or examined direct relationships between psychological variables, with limited attention given to mediation models among adolescents (Singh & Kumar, 2023; Upadhyay & Singh, 2024). Given the highly competitive and examination-driven nature of the Indian education system, understanding these psychological mechanisms at the higher secondary stage is both timely and essential.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary

students. By adopting a quantitative correlational approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how emotional competencies influence academic stress through students' beliefs in their academic capabilities. The findings are expected to contribute to contemporary educational psychology literature and offer practical insights for educators, school counsellors, and policymakers in designing targeted interventions to enhance emotional intelligence, strengthen self-efficacy, and reduce academic stress among adolescents.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Academic Stress among Higher Secondary Students

Academic stress has been recognised as a major psychological challenge faced by students at the higher secondary level due to increasing academic workload, competitive examination systems, and heightened expectations from parents and society. Academic stress is experienced when students perceive academic demands such as examinations, continuous assessments, and time constraints as exceeding their coping capacities. Recent studies have indicated that prolonged academic stress adversely affects students' emotional well-being, academic motivation, concentration, and overall psychological adjustment. Kumar and Bhargava (2022) reported that excessive academic stress leads to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced academic engagement among secondary school students. Similarly, Putwain and Daly (2023) highlighted that academic stress and test anxiety significantly impair students' performance and well-being, particularly during high-stakes examinations. In the Indian educational context, the examination-oriented system and intense competition further exacerbate academic stress, making it a critical area of concern in adolescent education.

2.2 Emotional Intelligence and Academic Stress

Emotional intelligence has gained significant attention as an important psychological resource influencing students' responses to academic stress. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilise emotions effectively in oneself and others. Students with higher emotional intelligence are better equipped to manage negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and fear of failure that often accompany academic challenges. Recent empirical studies have consistently reported a negative relationship between emotional

intelligence and academic stress. Gupta and Khan (2022) found that emotionally intelligent adolescents exhibited lower levels of academic stress and greater emotional stability. Singh and Kumar (2023) further demonstrated that emotional regulation, a key component of emotional intelligence, plays a crucial role in reducing academic anxiety and stress among senior secondary students. These findings suggest that emotional intelligence acts as a protective factor by enhancing students' emotional control and adaptive coping strategies in academically demanding situations.

2.3 Self-Efficacy and Academic Stress

Self-efficacy is another critical psychological variable that significantly influences students' experience of academic stress. Based on social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to organise and execute actions required to manage academic tasks successfully. Students with high self-efficacy tend to approach academic challenges with confidence, persistence, and problem-solving orientation, which reduces their perception of stress. Mahato and Sen (2022) reported a significant negative association between self-efficacy and academic stress among higher secondary students, indicating that low self-efficacy contributes to increased anxiety and stress. Supporting these findings, Rahman et al. (2024) observed that students with stronger self-efficacy beliefs demonstrated better stress management, higher motivation, and improved psychological well-being. These studies emphasise that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in shaping how students appraise and respond to academic demands.

2.4 Emotional Intelligence and Self-Efficacy

Recent literature has highlighted a strong interrelationship between emotional intelligence and self-efficacy. Emotional intelligence may enhance self-efficacy by enabling students to regulate emotions, maintain confidence, and persist in the face of academic difficulties. Students who are emotionally intelligent are more likely to interpret academic setbacks constructively, which strengthens their belief in their own abilities. Zysberg and Dolev (2023) suggested that emotional intelligence indirectly reduces academic stress by fostering higher levels of self-efficacy and adaptive coping strategies. This relationship indicates that emotional intelligence not only

directly influences academic stress but also operates through self-efficacy as a psychological mechanism.

2.5 Self-Efficacy as a Mediator between Emotional Intelligence and Academic Stress

Although emotional intelligence and self-efficacy have independently been found to be significant predictors of academic stress, limited empirical research has examined the mediating role of self-efficacy in this relationship. Emerging studies have called for mediation-based models to better understand how emotional competencies translate into reduced academic stress. Mohamed et al. (2025) emphasised that self-efficacy serves as a critical pathway through which emotional intelligence influences academic adjustment and stress management. However, most existing research has focused on university students or direct relationships, leaving a notable gap concerning higher secondary students, particularly in the Indian context. Addressing this gap is essential for developing comprehensive stress reduction strategies that target both emotional intelligence and self-efficacy.

2.6 Research Gap

Although previous studies have independently examined academic stress, emotional intelligence, and self-efficacy, limited empirical research has explored the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students, particularly within the Indian educational context.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study was undertaken with the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.
2. To analyse the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.

4. Research Hypotheses

To achieve the above objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated and tested:

Hypotheses 1

- H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.
- H_{11} : There is a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.

Hypotheses 2

- H_{02} : Self-efficacy does not significantly mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.
- H_{12} : Self-efficacy significantly mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.

5. Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative research approach employing a correlational survey design. This design was considered appropriate as the study aimed to examine the relationships among emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and academic stress, and to analyse the mediating effect of self-efficacy without manipulating any variables. The correlational design enabled the researcher to assess both the strength and direction of associations among the study variables and to test mediation through regression-based procedures.

Population and Sample

The population of the study comprised higher secondary students studying in Class XI in schools affiliated with the U.P. Board in Prayagraj city. A total of 300 students were selected as the initial

sample using appropriate sampling techniques to ensure adequate representation. After data collection, the responses were subjected to data screening for completeness, accuracy, and consistency. Consequently, 289 questionnaires were found to be valid and were retained for final statistical analysis. The final sample included both boys and girls from different academic streams, ensuring sufficient variability for meaningful statistical inference.

Sampling Technique

Random sampling was used for the selection of schools, while students were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure proportionate representation of gender. This sampling strategy enhanced the generalisability and external validity of the study findings.

Variables of the Study

- **Independent Variable:** Emotional Intelligence
- **Mediating Variable:** Self-Efficacy
- **Dependent Variable:** Academic Stress

Tools Used for Data Collection

The following standardised psychological instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Emotional Intelligence Scale** developed by Arun Kumar Singh and Shruti Narain (2014), measuring various dimensions of emotional awareness, regulation, and interpersonal competence.
2. **The Self-Efficacy Scale**, developed by Sarita Kaushik and Nisha Bhatnagar, assesses students' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks and overcome challenges.
3. **Academic Stress Scale**, developed by the investigator, is designed to measure stress related to examinations, academic workload, time pressure, and performance

expectations. The scale was standardised through pilot testing and expert validation to ensure content validity and reliability.

Procedure of Data Collection

Permission was obtained from the concerned school authorities prior to data collection. The respondents were briefed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaires were administered during school hours under the supervision of the researcher. Adequate time was provided to the respondents to complete the instruments, and all ethical considerations were strictly followed.

Statistical Techniques Used

The collected data were analysed using appropriate statistical tools:

- Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) to understand the general distribution of the variables
- Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation to examine relationships among emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and academic stress
- Regression-based mediation analysis to test the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress

All statistical analyses were carried out at a 0.05 level of significance.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality of responses, and the use of data strictly for academic purposes.

6. Data Analysis and Results

The data collected for the present study were analysed using appropriate statistical techniques to examine the relationships among emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and academic stress, and

to test the mediating role of self-efficacy. Prior to analysis, the data were screened for completeness, missing values, and outliers. Out of 300 questionnaires administered, 289 responses were found to be valid and were retained for final analysis. All statistical analyses were conducted using standard statistical software at a 0.05 level of significance.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to understand the general distribution and variability of emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and academic stress among higher secondary students.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N = 289)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Academic Stress	123.84	17.96
Emotional Intelligence	141.72	20.88
Self-Efficacy	78.36	12.54

The mean score of academic stress indicates a moderately high level of stress among higher secondary students, reflecting the academic pressure experienced at this stage. The mean scores of emotional intelligence and self-efficacy suggest that students possess moderate levels of psychological resources, though individual differences are evident as indicated by the standard deviation values.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was employed to examine the relationships among emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and academic stress.

Table 2
Correlation Matrix among the Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Academic Stress	1		
2. Emotional	-0.46**	1	

Intelligence			
3. Self-Efficacy	-0.51**	0.48**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

The results reveal a significant negative correlation between emotional intelligence and academic stress ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that students with higher emotional intelligence experience lower academic stress. Similarly, self-efficacy is significantly and negatively correlated with academic stress ($r = -0.51$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that stronger beliefs in academic capability are associated with reduced stress. Emotional intelligence and self-efficacy are positively correlated ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that emotionally intelligent students tend to possess higher self-efficacy.

Regression Analysis

To examine the predictive relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress, simple linear regression analysis was conducted.

Table 3

Regression Analysis Predicting Academic Stress from Emotional Intelligence

Predictor	β	t-value	p-value
Emotional Intelligence	-0.46	-8.92	.000

The regression analysis indicates that emotional intelligence significantly predicts academic stress ($\beta = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$). Higher emotional intelligence leads to a significant reduction in academic stress. Thus, the null hypothesis stating that emotional intelligence does not significantly predict academic stress is rejected.

Mediation Analysis

To test the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress, regression-based mediation analysis was performed following standard mediation procedures.

- Step 1: Emotional intelligence significantly predicted academic stress ($\beta = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$).
- Step 2: Emotional intelligence significantly predicted self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$).
- Step 3: Self-efficacy significantly predicted academic stress ($\beta = -0.51$, $p < 0.001$).
- Step 4: When both emotional intelligence and self-efficacy were entered simultaneously into the regression model, the effect of emotional intelligence on academic stress reduced but remained significant.

Table 4
Mediation Regression Analysis

Predictor	β	t-value	p-value
Emotional Intelligence	-0.27	-5.12	.000
Self-Efficacy	-0.38	-7.24	.000

The results indicate that self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress. The reduction in the beta value of emotional intelligence after including self-efficacy confirms the mediating effect. Thus, emotional intelligence reduces academic stress both directly and indirectly through enhanced self-efficacy.

Testing of Hypotheses

- **H₀₁** (There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress) is rejected.
- **H₀₂** (Self-efficacy does not significantly mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress) is rejected.

The alternative hypotheses are accepted, confirming the significant mediating role of self-efficacy.

The findings demonstrate that academic stress among higher secondary students is significantly influenced by emotional intelligence and self-efficacy. Emotional intelligence emerged as a strong predictor of academic stress, while self-efficacy played a crucial mediating role. Students with higher emotional intelligence tend to develop stronger self-efficacy beliefs, which in turn significantly reduce their experience of academic stress.

7. Testing of Hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated for the present study were tested using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and regression-based mediation analysis. All statistical tests were conducted at a **0.05 level of significance** to determine the acceptance or rejection of the null hypotheses.

Testing of Hypothesis H_{01}

Null Hypothesis (H_{01}): There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.

To test this hypothesis, Pearson's Product Moment Correlation analysis was employed. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between emotional intelligence and academic stress ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that students with higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to experience lower levels of academic stress.

Since the obtained p-value was less than the level of significance (0.05), the null hypothesis H_{01} was rejected. Therefore, it can be concluded that emotional intelligence has a significant relationship with academic stress among higher secondary students.

Testing of Hypothesis H_{02}

Null Hypothesis (H_{02}): Self-efficacy does not significantly mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.

To test the mediating role of self-efficacy, regression-based mediation analysis was conducted. The results indicated that:

1. Emotional intelligence significantly predicted academic stress.
2. Emotional intelligence significantly predicted self-efficacy.
3. Self-efficacy significantly predicted academic stress.
4. When both emotional intelligence and self-efficacy were included in the regression model, the direct effect of emotional intelligence on academic stress was reduced but remained statistically significant.

This reduction in the regression coefficient of emotional intelligence, along with the significant contribution of self-efficacy, confirms the presence of partial mediation.

As the mediation effect was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), the null hypothesis H_{02} was rejected. Hence, it can be concluded that self-efficacy significantly mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress among higher secondary students.

8. Discussion

The present study was undertaken to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress and to analyse the mediating role of self-efficacy among higher secondary students. The findings of the study provide strong empirical support for the proposed mediation model and offer meaningful insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying academic stress during late adolescence.

The results revealed a significant negative relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress, indicating that students with higher emotional intelligence experience lower levels of academic stress. This finding is consistent with recent research which suggests that emotionally intelligent students are better equipped to regulate negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and fear of failure arising from academic demands. Emotional intelligence enhances students' ability to interpret academic challenges more adaptively, thereby reducing emotional overload and stress perception. The present findings reinforce earlier studies which have reported that emotional regulation and emotional awareness play a crucial role in managing academic stress at the higher secondary level.

The study also found a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and self-efficacy. This suggests that emotionally intelligent students tend to develop stronger beliefs in their academic capabilities. Emotional intelligence enables students to manage emotional reactions effectively, maintain confidence during academic setbacks, and persist in challenging academic situations. These emotional competencies facilitate mastery experiences, which in turn strengthen self-efficacy beliefs. This finding aligns with contemporary educational psychology literature emphasising the role of emotional competencies in enhancing academic motivation and confidence.

Furthermore, self-efficacy was found to be significantly and negatively related to academic stress. Students with higher self-efficacy reported lower levels of academic stress, as they perceived academic demands as manageable challenges rather than overwhelming threats. High self-efficacy encourages adaptive coping strategies, persistence, and effective problem-solving, which collectively reduce stress perception. Conversely, students with low self-efficacy are more likely to experience doubt, anxiety, and heightened stress when faced with academic pressure.

Most importantly, the mediation analysis confirmed that self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress. This finding indicates that emotional intelligence reduces academic stress not only directly but also indirectly by strengthening students' self-efficacy beliefs. Emotional intelligence contributes to stress reduction by enhancing emotional regulation, while self-efficacy serves as a psychological pathway through which emotional intelligence influences students' appraisal of academic demands. The partial mediation suggests that emotional intelligence also has a direct effect on academic stress, independent of self-efficacy. This highlights the multifaceted role of emotional intelligence in stress management and underscores the importance of considering both emotional and cognitive belief-based factors in understanding academic stress among adolescents.

9. Educational Implications

The findings of the present study have significant implications for educational practice, curriculum planning, and student support services at the higher secondary level. Given the strong influence of emotional intelligence on academic stress, educational institutions should integrate

emotional intelligence development programmes into the school curriculum. Structured interventions focusing on emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills can help students manage academic pressure more effectively.

The mediating role of self-efficacy highlights the need for instructional strategies that strengthen students' confidence in their academic abilities. Teachers can foster self-efficacy by providing mastery-oriented learning experiences, constructive feedback, and opportunities for goal-setting and self-reflection. Encouraging students to recognise their academic strengths and progress can significantly reduce stress and enhance academic engagement.

School counsellors and psychologists can play a vital role by designing counselling and guidance programmes that address both emotional regulation and self-belief. Stress management workshops, resilience training, and life-skills education can be used to equip students with coping strategies that enhance emotional competence and academic confidence. Additionally, early identification of students with low emotional intelligence or self-efficacy can help in providing targeted interventions before academic stress becomes severe.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the importance of adopting a holistic approach to education that prioritises students' psychological well-being alongside academic achievement. Educational policymakers should promote student-friendly evaluation systems and support programmes that reduce excessive academic pressure while fostering emotional and psychological development.

10. Conclusion

The present study concludes that emotional intelligence and self-efficacy are significant psychological factors influencing academic stress among higher secondary students. Emotional intelligence was found to be negatively associated with academic stress and positively associated with self-efficacy, while self-efficacy significantly reduced students' experience of academic stress. The mediation analysis confirmed that self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship

between emotional intelligence and academic stress, indicating that emotional intelligence reduces academic stress both directly and indirectly through enhanced self-belief.

These findings emphasise that academic stress is not solely determined by external academic demands but is strongly influenced by students' internal psychological resources. Strengthening emotional intelligence and self-efficacy can play a crucial role in reducing academic stress and promoting psychological well-being during late adolescence. The study contributes to the existing body of literature by providing empirical evidence for a mediation model at the higher secondary level within the Indian educational context.

Fostering emotionally intelligent and self-efficacious learners can lead to healthier academic environments, improved stress management, and sustainable academic success among higher secondary students. Future research may extend this work by incorporating longitudinal designs, additional psychological variables, or intervention-based studies to further enhance understanding of academic stress and its management.

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